



# Nutrition for a healthy heart

By 1st Lt. Melissa Shaffer, Evans Dietician

February is American Heart Month, a time to increase awareness of a group of diseases that include heart disease, high blood pressure and stroke. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the United States resulting in about 600,000 deaths every year. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the key risk factors for heart disease include high blood pressure, elevated LDL cholesterol and smoking.

The CDC recommends many different strategies to reduce your risk of heart disease including regular exercise, maintaining a healthy weight, not smoking, avoiding excess alcohol, controlling blood sugars and eating a heart healthy diet.

A heart healthy diet including a balanced intake of fruits, vegetables, whole-grains, fat-free and low-fat dairy products and lean meats and fish can reduce your risk of heart disease. The amount of fat in your diet should be limited to about 25-35% of the calories you eat daily, with no more than 7% from saturated fats.

Try to eat a diet low in saturated fat and avoid trans-fats. Foods high in saturated fat include whole milk, fatty meats, poultry skin, heavy cream, butter, lard and tropical oils, such as coconut oil. To reduce saturated fat in your diet, select lean meats, remove the skin from poultry, select more plant-based proteins, such as beans, and eat smaller portions of meat. Select low-fat or fat-free milk and dairy products and use trans-fat free margarine instead of butter.

Trans-fats are found in some margarines, shortenings, and many highly processed, packaged foods. Check the food label for trans-fats by looking for "partially hydrogenated" oils in the ingredients list. When cooking, avoid lard and butter, and instead cook with a small amount of canola or olive oil.

Select more healthy fats, like omega-3 fatty acids which are found naturally in some fish, flaxseed, walnuts, and canola oil. Try eating fish at least two times per week. Fish rich in omega-3 fats include salmon, sardines, mackerel and tuna. When eating flaxseed, select ground flaxseed, and try adding it to oatmeal, cereal and baked goods.

Increase your intake of dietary fiber and aim for 20-30 grams daily. Good sources of dietary fiber include vegetables, fruits, whole grains and beans. If your triglycerides are elevated, increase your intake of soluble fiber and phytosterols. Soluble fiber is found in beans, oats, oat bran and some fruits. When increasing your fiber intake, do so slowly and make sure to drink plenty of fluids.

Limit sodium intake to less than 2,000 mg per day. Many canned, frozen, processed and packaged foods, deli meats, cheeses and condiments are high in sodium. Read food labels and try to select foods with no more than 140 mg of sodium per serving. It is best to prepare your foods at home as many restaurant foods can be high in sodium. Keep in mind that a quarter teaspoon of table salt contains about 600 mg of sodium, so instead of adding salt to your food, try herbs, spices or salt-free seasonings.

Making lifestyle changes now and eating a heart healthy diet can reduce your risk of heart disease and many other chronic diseases. If you are interested in learning more about following a heart healthy diet, consider attending the monthly Cholesterol class, hosted by the Evans Army Community Hospital Nutrition Care Division staff. Call 526-7290 to sign up.